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ABSTRACT

A glossary providing a common set of definitions for thinking and talking about assessment policy in undergraduate education is presented. Terms with more general meaning are defined only in this specific context. This glossary was developed as part of a series of Education Commission of the States case studies of state-based approaches to assessment in undergraduate education. The glossary defines terms falling under the following three general categories: (1) implementation of assessment programs (i.e. assessment plan, basic skills, college outcomes assessment, exit examinations, retention, general intellectual skills, unit record system, and value-added); (2) applications of assessment to decision making (i.e. accountability, certification, consumer protection, gatekeeping, mandatory placement, performance funding, rising junior examination, and student tracking); and (3) measurement terms relevant to assessment policy (i.e. forced-choice, free-response, indicator, norm-referenced testing, peer comparison, reliability, standardized testing, sub-score, testing, and validity). Contains 14 references. (SM)

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STATE-BASED APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:

A Glossary and Selected References

PS-88-2

by

Carol M. Boyer and Peter T. Ewell

Education Commission of the States
1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300
Denver, Colorado 80295

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Carol M. Boyer is senior policy analyst for higher education, Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.

Peter T. Ewell is senior associate, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Boulder, CO.

For further information, contact:
Carol M. Boyer
Education Commission of the States
1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300
Denver, CO 80295
Phone: (303) 830-3625

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GLOSSARY OF ASSESSMENT POLICY TERMS

The purpose of this glossary is to provide both state and institutional leaders with a common set of definitions for thinking and talking about assessment policy in undergraduate education. Terms with more general meaning (e.g., accountability) are defined only in this specific context. Terms appearing in quotation marks are defined elsewhere in the glossary.

The glossary was developed as part of a series of ECS case studies of state-based approaches to assessment in undergraduate education. In December 1987 and January 1988, we interviewed both state and institutional leaders in five states: Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, South Dakota and Virginia.

The ECS case studies, in turn, are part of Missouri Governor John Ashcroft's college quality initiative as 1987-88 chairman of ECS; they were co-sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum, which is funded by the federal Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education.

Assessment: Any process of gathering concrete evidence about the impact and functioning of undergraduate education. The term can apply to processes that provide information about individual students, about curricula or programs, about institutions or about entire systems of institutions. The term encompasses a range of procedures including testing, survey methods, performance measures or feedback to individual students, resulting in both quantitative and qualitative information.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS

Assessment plan: A formal document indicating the manner in which an institution or subunit within an institution intends to organize, fund, implement and use the results of assessment over a designated time period.

Basic skills: Those skills required for students to successfully engage in college-level work, including reading, writing and mathematics. Assessment of these skills generally occurs on entry into undergraduate education.

College outcomes assessment: Assessment of the results of undergraduate education. Can include cognitive, skill or attitudinal outcomes, postgraduate behavior such as job or graduate school placement or performance, or more general impacts on a community, region or society.

Exit examination: An assessment given at the end of a particular program of study. Can function as a "gatekeeping" device or as a basis for awarding a degree, individual honors or other distinctions.

General intellectual skills: Broad-based college-level skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, advanced communication skills, quantitative reasoning or creativity, that all students should acquire regardless of institution, major or program.

Incentive funding: Use of funding to induce institutions or subunits within institutions to engage in certain activities or to attain designated objectives. May include such devices as challenge grants, funds for excellence or categorical program-improvement grants.

Program completion: The number or proportion of students seeking an undergraduate degree who are, in fact, awarded a degree. Generally expressed as the percentage of a group of students who entered an institution at the same time, and who are awarded degrees within a designated time period (e.g., five years for a baccalaureate degree).

Program review: An evaluation of the overall effectiveness of an academic program (generally a degree program). Can include outcomes assessment, productivity and efficiency, resource requirements, need, clientele or community/society impact. Also referred to as program audit or program evaluation.

Retention: The number or proportion of students who enter an institution at the same time, and who continue to enroll in that institution from term to term, over a designated number of years.

Student follow-up: Assessment of student activities, attitudes and experiences after leaving a postsecondary institution. Generally includes both successful degree completers and students who withdrew without completing a program. Often includes a judgment of the adequacy of education received.

Unit record system: A centralized statewide recordkeeping system employing common definitions and containing enrollment information about all students enrolled in public institutions in a given system or state. Can be used in a variety of ways, including in supporting statewide student-tracking studies and for assessing patterns of student transfer from one institution to another.

Value-added: The assessed contribution of undergraduate education to the development of identified student abilities. Generally used to refer to pre- and post-testing of students on entry to and exit from a postsecondary institution in order to determine change. Occasionally, "value-added" models assess growth from entry to a convenient mid-point in the curriculum (e.g., end of the sophomore year).

APPLICATIONS OF ASSESSMENT TO DECISION MAKING

Accountability: Use of assessment results to assure funding authorities and the general public that tax dollars invested in higher education are being well spent. Generally requires public disclosure of assessment results in summary form.

Admissions testing: Use of assessment to control student access to higher education. Results can function alone as a "gatekeeping" device or can be used in combination with other information to make an admissions decision.

Advisement/placement: Use of assessment results to provide feedback to individual students on their levels of skill and to place them in appropriate courses and programs.

Certification: Use of an examination or assessment procedure to determine an individual's competence to engage in professional practice or to officially recognize the possession of a range of identified knowledge and skills.

Consumer protection: Use of assessment results to assure students and their parents that they are receiving a sound product. Can also refer to the potential comparative use of assessment results by consumers in choosing which institution to attend.

Gatekeeping: Use of assessment to control student access to particular programs, levels of instruction or higher education as a whole. Assessment results alone determine whether a student gains access.

Mandatory placement: Use of assessment results (usually in basic skills areas) to determine the courses or sequences of courses in which a student is permitted to enroll.

Performance funding: Allocation by a funding authority of additional non-base funding to institutions or subunits within institutions on the basis of specified performance, as indicated by assessment results.

Rising junior examination: Use of a single examination to control access into the third year of undergraduate study. Functions as a "gatekeeping" device, i.e., performance on the examination is used to determine whether a student can continue into upper-division college work.

Student tracking: Use of information from institutional records to determine patterns of student retention and program completion, and to evaluate the success of remedial programs.

MEASUREMENT TERMS RELEVANT TO ASSESSMENT POLICY

Criterion-referenced testing: Testing in which scores are reported relative to established external standards of performance and indicate how an individual stands with respect to each standard.

Forced-choice: An examination format that requires students to choose answers to each question or item from among a limited range of provided alternatives.

Free-response: An examination format that allows students to produce answers to posed questions or items in a short answer or essay format.

Indicator: Information that reflects a particular dimension of institutional, program or student performance, but may not directly measure such performance. Examples include student demography, program diversity, adequacy of instructional and learning resources, contributions to economic development, and student satisfaction and placement. Because indicators constitute indirect evidence of performance, multiple indicators are generally used.

Norm-referenced testing: Standardized testing in which scores are reported relative to a defined population and indicate the standing of an individual or group with respect to other members of that population.

Peer comparison: Comparison of institution-level assessment results against results obtained at an identified set of other institutions selected to be similar on characteristics such as mission, size, selectivity, location, cost and program array.

Reliability: The extent to which repeated administrations of an assessment instrument to the same individuals yield comparable results. For "free-response" testing, can also refer to the consistency with which different raters or judges assess the same performance.

Standardized testing: Testing that yields a set of standard scores that meet accepted levels of reliability. Can include both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced instruments, using both multiple-choice and "free-response" formats. Standard scores can be compared across students or institutions and against national data.

Sub-score: A standardized test score reporting the results of a designated portion of a test or examination and reflecting an individual's performance on a distinct dimension of knowledge or skill.

Testing: Administration of an instrument to determine student ability and skill levels across an identified range of knowledge and skills. Can include standardized and non-standardized instruments as well as "forced-choice" and "free-response" examination formats. Results can generally be reported in terms of summary judgments of performance and, within statistical limits, can be compared across individuals and student populations.

Validity: The extent to which the results produced by an assessment instrument actually reflect the underlying concepts or abilities that the instrument purports to measure.

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